BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Walter Alexander

It was segregated, yes, definitely. You had certain areas of town [Corpus Christi] that were all Black, and this is where you went. The buses were segregated, the city buses were segregated, but the military buses weren't segregated. They attempted to do some of it, but it wasn't really. But the movies on the base was segregated. And the barracks and so forth, Blacks slept in separate barracks from Whites. The movies, right up front were a number of rows for the Blacks and all the other was for Whites. It was really terrible. So consequently, some of us didn't see too many movies because we resented having to sit up front, and besides, it was too close. You didn't, you know, we didn't like it in the first place. But yes, there was segregation down there.

Walter Alexander was born on a farm in Boligee, Green County, Alabama on July 16, 1924. He was raised and schooled in Green County.

He was drafted by the navy in 1943. After attending cooks and bakers school Alexander worked in the navy's food service section.

He came to Hawai'i in 1965 to manage the navy commissary stores' meat department. Following his retirement in 1967, he sold mutual funds and insurance.

Tape No. 18-22-1-88

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Walter Alexander (WA)

July 21, 1988

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Kathryn Takara (KT)

KT: This is July 22, this is Kathryn Takara interviewing Walter Alexander on Punahou Street in Honolulu, Hawai'i.

WA: This is the 22nd or 21st?

KT: First. Twenty-first.

WA: Twenty-first.

KT: Correct that. (WA chuckles.) July 21, 1988.

Mr. Alexander, please, if you could tell me first, where you were born and when, and from that question, move into some of the influences, people that you knew, etc., in your early life in--was it Alabama?

WA: Mm hmm, yes. I was born in Green County, Alabama, in 1924, July 16, 1924. It was a very poor environment. That particular area is, economically, very, very poor. There was no--at that time, there was no heavy industry at all, no, nothing excepting the logging, sawmill company, and farming. Principally cotton, corn, things of that nature. A good deal of that is changed now. But, I was born on the farm and we--my father had a farm. We still own land down there now. But, that was the beginning of it.

KT: Did you come from a large family?

WA: Yes. My family consisted of ten children. Well, actually, there was eleven children. Two has passed now, and that nine are left--I mean, five girls and four boys. I'm the only one that lived here in Honolulu. We have one sister in California. One brother still in Alabama, and all the others live in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

KT: What was it like growing up in Green County, Alabama, on the farm there? How much of your time was spent in school and did you help your dad out, and what did you eat? Give us a flavor for what it was like then.

WA: Well, it was a lot of work. Our days started very early in the morning. Before day, the boys were up. We had to, if it was in the summertime, spring and summer, the boys would get up, start a fire in the stove. We had the old wooden stove. If there was no wood, if there wasn't sufficient wood already chopped to do the cooking, the boys had to do that. And the boys had to bring the water in, because the water, we had outside wells for water. No running water inside the house. Then we would go to the barns and start doing the chores there, milking cows, feeding the hogs and all the livestock.

KT: How much livestock was there on the farm? What did you have there?

WA: Well, we had cattle, milk cattle, beef cattle. Not an awful lot--probably, oh, I'd say twenty-five or fifty head total on the farm. That's what we had, during those days. And we had horses. Oh, there must have been three or four horses that we--and probably a couple of mules, which were used primarily in the farm, because we didn't have a tractor or anything like that. We had pigs because we'd raise hogs for our own food. We had lots of chickens. As a matter of fact, we raised chickens and sold them for quite a while there. We started from the--we'd raised the--start with the little ones at a day old, and put them in the incubators, and then raised them up from there. We had lots of those.

KT: Sound fairly affluent. It sounds like it was a fairly affluent small farm.

WA: Well, you had lots of food. (Chuckles) You had very little money, because even the abundance of food, if you tried to sell it, you didn't get very much in cash receipts for it. A dozen of eggs probably was no more than ten or fifteen cents.

KT: I see.

WA: So, you can see that it wasn't much. We used to have lots of sweet potatoes, and we never grew many white potatoes, but we had lots of sweet potatoes. We had lots of corn. And we grew watermelons and peas, and all those things. But any of this produce that you sold, you got a very minimal amount for it. As a matter of fact, we gave away more than we sold to people who did not have, we'd just give it to them. And that was generally the way people did in that area and, I think, throughout the South. They still do, to this day, they're very generous with their farm products. They share with each other.

KT: What was the climate like there?

WA: Climate, you had the four seasons. The summer was extremely hot, particular around July and August. Then into the fall, the leaves would change and you had a beautiful scenery of the changing the colors of the leaves. And then as winter approach, we never had much snow down there. We would have little snow, but it didn't last very long. Sometimes, it would barely cover the ground. But the

temperatures would get fairly low, probably somewhere in the middle and low thirties a lot of times. Then the spring would be very beautiful, when all of the trees started budding out, and the various blooms and berries and so forth started coming forth in the spring. Very beautiful.

And, of course, then this, when you--in the case with most of us Blacks, you began to miss a lot of school days, because it was planting season and so forth, and we would miss a lot of time in school. Same thing in the fall, harvesting. We were, a lot of time, we were late getting into school. We would miss a considerable amount of days, trying to finish the harvesting.

KT: So, what was your attitude toward school when you would have to miss? Would you be able to keep up at home or it was inevitable that people would get behind?

WA: It was inevitable that a lot of people would get behind. The members of my family generally kept up fairly good because we would study at home. The older children would help the younger, such a large family, you know, so there was always someone there that could help the younger ones. And, of course, the younger ones didn't have to miss as much time as the elder ones, but somehow, we were able to keep up pretty good, and I don't recall any of us ever having to repeat a class.

KT: How was the school? Tell me about the school.

WA: The school was--it was the only, in the county, it was the only high school in the county. They had grades one through twelve. The curriculum was not what it should have been. We had almost no Black history, and what little there was, wasn't really factual. We didn't have a lot of the subjects that would have provided us with the tools that we really needed, such as higher mathematics. I never knew anything about algebra until I was in the military, and I went to several night classes to learn what little I did learn about algebra. No calculus was ever, to my knowledge, taught even, I would say, during the next fifteen, twenty years after I left there. I think they are probably teaching it now, but during those days, you did not have that.

KT: What about literature?

WA: Very little literature, very little literature. You had the basic geography, mathematics, spelling, you know, English, but even then, you didn't get what you really needed, because the teachers were not really prepared, not to the extent that they should have been. They did a good job with what they had, though.

We had home economics. And we had the agricultural classes for--this was mainly the boys in the agricultural side, and the girls in the home economics, and so forth. They were teaching us how to continue doing what our parents had been doing all these

years on the farm, only doing it a little better and using, you know, little different techniques, which helped us improve the production on our farm and conserve the land, things like that.

KT: What about church?

WA: Oh, we always had church. You went to church every Sunday. We were, my family were Baptists. And those were the long sermons. You go for the early morning Sunday school, and then from that, into the services, and that would last for several hours. The kids would be, oh, so tired, and they want (chuckles) to get out of there, but. . . . The church is what really held us together and gave us hope down there. And as you already know that, the strength of the Black has always come from the church. Because this is the only area that you could protest was through the church. And our strength has always come from there. But yes, we certainly, all of us, had to attend that church every Sunday.

KT: Were there any particular leaders in the community that you remember, that you looked up to, or that you want to emulate or that encouraged you. . . .

WA: Well, there was one person that inspired me in particular, and that was our ag [Agriculture] teacher, Professor Shaw. He's one of the persons that inspired me, aside from my father. My father was the, more or less, the leader. Somehow, he was unofficially chosen as the sort of the leader of our community. And he was a very persistent person. He had strict moral standards, and he didn't waver from those at all. He was one of the fairest persons I've ever known. One of the most caring persons I've ever known. Commanded enormous respect among both the Black community and the White community.

And, of course, I got a lot of inspiration from an old man, I can't seem to remember his name, now (Charles Elliott). He was born into slavery. He was mixed. His father was Haole and his mother was Black. So, he told me that he didn't have quite as rough a time as he might have, because his mother was, I believe, the cook for that family, and so he had it a little better. But, he used to tell me stories, which were true stories, of his experience and a lot of the things that went on during the Civil War, or right after the Civil War apparently. But it was a very interesting. I used to stay there, you know, hang out around this guy a lot and just listen to him talk. He would just go on, and on, and on, and on.

KT: Can you remember any particular stories that were impressive to you? Can you share one or two of his stories?

WA: Oh, the things I can't remember too much of the particular stories, but what stuck with me most was the way the Blacks resisted [slavery], how they resisted, not having the education or the weapons to mass resist. They still had a form of resistance and they kept their pride. And they would do it in such ways. They led

me to believe, even till today, that the Black is probably the most astute politician that you'll ever find, and the way they conducted themselves, the way they would pretend in their dealings with the Whites. It was just really amazing how much resistance these people put up during those days, when a lot of people were saying they were not resisting. But they did have their own form of resistance, and it was very effective. They did accomplish some things, certainly not near what we would have hoped, but they did accomplish some relief for themselves.

KT: Can you recall any ways of resistance that he would speak of? I mean, was it out and out burning, or stealing, or breaking tools, or slowdowns, work slowdowns, or can you remember?

WA: Those were some of the things they would do. And the way they would fake illness for someone that particular--say if a woman that was pregnant, she was required to do a certain amount of work, and they would convince the boss that she was ill, and they protected each other in those ways. And that they would deliberately break something, maybe even a wagon wheel, they'd knock a spoke out and say that it got caught in something and this would delay things. There were a number of things they would do like that, and how they would, to get back, had to give themselves self-satisfaction from being mistreated, how they would put things into food and drink and then get the satisfaction of laughing that this (chuckles) person was eating or drinking something that they say, you know, was contaminated with some foreign matter. These kinds of things gave them their own self-satisfaction and it was an endless charade of things of that nature that were done. But the outpouring of love and care for each other was always there. And probably, I suppose, during that period was the beginning of when the Blacks began to form closer family ties, because prior to that, they had been separated so vigorously till each person was, more or less, thinking in terms of himself or herself. But then the family ties began to grow during that period, particularly right after the war.

KT: What about medical care and dental care and health care when you were growing up? What did people do?

WA: You had only one source of medical care during those days, during the earlier days of my life down there, and that was the midwife. The midwife was indispensable and she was one of the most important persons in the community. She knew all the remedies. She would go out into the woods and come back with herbs and leaves and things, and brewed teas, and you would get well. She had a remedy for just about anything that happened to you. She brought the young into the world. She knew how to cut the umbilical cord, and how to treat that, and you didn't end up with a big disfigured navel. And the wife, the mother of the child was not required, didn't go through an awful lot of pain in the old days, because they had teas and things that they gave them, and they were up and about in two or three days. They were up and about. They never got out and did any work for, you know, some days after that, but they were up and about.

And it was just amazing. And the death rate, in our area, was, of newborns, was very, very low. Very low. You very seldom heard of a child being either born stillborn or dying as an infant. But that midwife was the person that did it.

Now, so far as dentist is concerned, we didn't have access to any dentist. We didn't know what that was. They would pull the teeth themselves. Some of the adults would pull their teeth right out of there, and you went right on. It's just one of those things that we didn't think anything about it, because that's the way it was.

KT: Even me, I never went to the dentist until I was eleven, I think. We never had that. How do you think a midwife learned, learned her . . .

WA: Her trade?

KT: . . . her trade and her skills and her art?

WA: I don't know how it was originally learned, but I do know that it was passed on from one to the other. They would, I suppose, there was always someone that would come along who was interested in doing this type of work, by watching the midwife, and the midwife could tell, you know, and show her. This person is interested and I think she will learn. And she would teach her. She'd teach her and train her right along. So, it was just passed on that way. There was nothing written down. I would suppose most of them couldn't even write. So, it was just passed on from word of mouth.

KT: And not through a family, to the same family necessarily, it was interest.

WA: Yeah, it was more interest than from family to . . .

KT: To her daughter. . .

WA: . . . you know, still right in the family, yeah. But it was well learned and passed on.

KT: What about art and music and those kinds of creative expressions? How did they manifest within your community?

WA: Music, about the only music that we had, for the most part, was the gospel music, the church music. There was a certain amount, of course, of music for dancing, such as it was. But the instruments were crude. Someone would have a guitar, and maybe someone would have a fiddle, and then they would use, for lack of having a bass, they would use an old jug and produce, by blowing across the mouth of the jug, produce a bass sound. And they would somehow get it together and make music that they could, people could dance by. And there was always someone with a good voice that could sing. Primarily the blues, because that was what really stirred the people, and people loved it. And that was basically the type of

things that you heard.

Art, you didn't see much of that. There were a few talented people that came along from time to time who would start out drawing things, and if that type of person was able to leave the area and get some training, they might get into painting and so forth, but they never came back, because there was no place for them there. There was no way that they could make a living doing that in that area.

I know of one person that was very gifted. His mother was one of the teachers at one of the schools there. And the family had considerable properties, so they were able to send their children to college. This fellow didn't complete college, but he did go for a while. He became a very good architect, in that he designed a lot of homes. His two brothers were very skillful at building. And he would draw up the blueprint and the other two brothers would, with their help, they would get together and build the house. And they had a real good team there, as long as this guy didn't get contrary and decide that he would not tell them how to do something, because his other two brothers, some of his blueprints, they would have trouble reading, you know, and if he didn't read it and tell them what they were supposed to be doing, they would have some problem, you know. But they, throughout that whole area, there are many, many homes that they have built. And, as a matter of fact, when I was down there last, they, I found, that they are still doing some of that.

KT: So, when did your world start to open up from Green County, Alabama, to something larger? When did you start to realize that there was more of the world and that you wanted to see it? How did that happen?

WA: Well, that happened in 1943 when I was drafted . . .

(Laughter)

WA: . . . into the military. They drafted me into the military, and I was taken to Georgia, Ft. Benning, for induction. I was asked where did I want to take my basic training. And, of course, I didn't have the slightest idea. I asked him what choices did I have, and he said, "Well, you can go to Annapolis, you can go to Great Lakes, or you can do it right here in Ft. Benning."

And I asked him, "What was this, where was this Great Lakes?" Because I'd never heard of any such thing.

He say, "Oh, that's up there somewhere around Chicago."

I thought, ah, everybody from Alabama goes to Chicago, so I'll take that if I can get it. So he--they get stamped, you know, and he just, boomed, stamped mine, and away I was gone to (chuckles) Chicago, to Great Lakes. And that's where I had my training. And

that put me into the navy. Being in the navy, if I had chosen--oh, there was one other, Norfolk.

So, if I didn't go to Great Lakes, I would have been a steward. In the navy, a steward is a person that made beds for officers, shined shoes, and served officers, but going to Great Lakes, I was put into what they call the seaman branch and didn't have to do that type of work. So, that was a blessing in disguise, and it just happened that way, because, I think, I would have a very terrible time adjusting--well, I don't think I would have ever adjusted to doing that kind of work, making beds and shining shoes. I probably would have gotten myself a dishonorable (chuckles) discharge, yeah.

KT: Before we continue with the navy existence, can you speak a little bit about the relations between the Blacks and the Whites down there in Alabama, and if there was any Jim Crow and how did it manifest and just kind of the racial climate down there.

WA: Oh, it was all over the place, and from the fact that you had separate water fountains. If there was, for instance, the drug store had, [the area] where they would serve Coke and ice cream and things, they may have one little small space about two feet of the counter, where no place to sit down. And you would go up and they would, you go this area, that's where the Blacks had to go and purchase. Then you had to take it outside and eat it.

You didn't go into restaurants. They wouldn't serve you. You weren't allowed in there in the first place. And some of us, my father taught us not to even patronize the places where you had to go to a window and get something, whereas everybody else, the Whites, went inside. He said, well, just wait until you get home and eat. You don't--or he would go into the grocery store and buy a Coke or something like that, and open it, and you could drink it there. That way, but he'd rather do that, than to go to a place where everybody was served properly and you had to stand outside, or something like that. But, yes. There was much of that.

The buses, all public transportation, you had designated in the rear seats. It was just, it was really the height of degradation. Even churches, you were not allowed to go to church together. Schools, the same thing. Schools were not equal in any form. The Whites had the better schools. The Whites had buses to ride to and from school. Eventually, they got a few buses for the Blacks, but they were not of the same quality, and there wasn't as many of them.

And it was just as if there was two separate societies living there in that one little community. It was very, very, very difficult. There was some instances where Blacks got into serious trouble because they resented it so much, and they wouldn't take it. So, yes, there was discrimination all over the place.

KT: Was there a jail?

WA: Oh, there was a jail, and it was staffed by all Whites and it was--whoever was in jail was almost always Black. They had a few cells there for, as I understand, I was never there, but--I was never inside of the thing, I used to walk pass it--but I understand that they had several cells there that they would use for the few Whites whenever they did put them in there. But nothing hardly ever happened to them. They would have to kill another White or something before you were to have any problems, they would have any serious problems with the law. They could kill a Black and there wouldn't be hardly anything done to it [him]. They may pick him up and question him or something, or pretend that they were going through the act of holding a court, a trial on it, but nothing happened. If you were White, and you killed a Black, you never got really punished, you see. But Blacks could get into serious trouble for just nothing at all, hardly.

KT: Like [what]?

WA: I've known Blacks just looking at White woman, get into serious trouble over it.

KT: To go to jail? That serious?

WA: Yeah. And, of course, back in those days, people being human, there were some of the White girls would flirt with some of the Black boys. And then, of course, if it was just turned around, the Black girls, the White guy, if he went with a Black woman, of course, there was nothing, there was nothing to it. But, Blacks, Black men and White women were the brunt of the social strife down there. Black woman and White men were the only ones with any semblance of freedom insofar as the social life is concerned.

KT: But that would not--would that, could that be a public thing? A Black woman and a White man?

WA: Ah, it could be fairly public, yeah.

KT: But then, the White man would have to come into the Black community, would that, or the Black woman, would she go into the White community . . .

WA: No, he would, in many cases, he would set her up at a house, and he would visit her there and all of that, and it was known throughout the place, you know, throughout the entire community, what was going on. And she didn't have an awful, she would never have an awful lot of friends, you know. But, it did happen. Oh, yes. It did happen.

KT: So, when did you first discover that there was a difference between the races?

WA: I suppose you always knew it, in those days, living down there, because it was--you were born into it and you saw it every day, and you were told not to get involved with this because you didn't, you

weren't supposed to do this. This is the law or this is the practice. And my parents, of course, took the attitude and taught us that you're no better than anyone else and nobody's better than you. And they taught us not to hang around in areas where we would be mistreated and all of that kind of stuff. The little town was very small, but we never were taught or allowed to hang around there. If we went in there, we went in there on business, we bought what we went there for or whatever our business was, and we went back home. And that was the way we did it. And we were never subjected to a lot of the abuses that some others may have been that spent a lot of time in and around those people, you see.

In the later years, there was an old White family that lived for about half a mile or so from where we lived. My father and this old gentleman got along very well. They would go to each other's place and sit on the porch and talk. And he'd come to our house and they'd sit on the porch and talk. They never invited each other inside, and, of course, my mother and the wife of the White man never visited each other. They saw each other, they were pleasant, and spoke, you know. But, there wasn't enough, a lot of that type of thing going on, but this did happen in some cases. But I never understood how they could even borrow each other's farming equipment, and sit and talk to each other like that, and yet they could not go to church together. And my father always taught us not to--he always taught us not to hate the White people, but be very careful and never trust them too far, because he felt that they would take advantage of you or they would abuse you in some way.

KT: And where was your mother during all of this time?

WA: My mother was the--I found in later years, particularly at my father's funeral, I found that she was the strength of the family.

KT: What was her name again?

WA: Mary.

KT: And what was her maiden name?

WA: Her maiden name was Threets.

KT: Threets, Mary Threets.

WA: Mary Threets, yeah. She was the strength of the family. I didn't know it for all those years, but she was. And she worked in the fields with us. She looked after the house and the children and all of this. She did the sewing and the cooking, and she taught us all how to cook, and how to sew our clothes if it needed. How to put buttons on, and so forth. She made sure the boys knew how to do that. And she was a real saint.

KT: Was she a big woman or small woman or. . . .

WA: She was, I would say, sort of a medium size. She wasn't a real large woman until years, up in her later years, then she put on weight, and she was a pretty good size. But most of her earlier years, she was a tall woman about, I would say, about five [feet] eight or nine [inches], and probably weighed about a hundred and thirty-five or -forty pounds. But she carried it real well because of her height. And later years, she gained a little more, but I don't think she ever got more than, oh, 150 or [1]60 at the most. Then, toward the end, of course, naturally, she lost weight and became thin again.

KT: During those days, in terms of luxuries, can you remember what kinds of luxuries, I mean, nowadays, we take for granted in makeup and petticoats and stockings, you know, especially things that women have. Can you remember in those days, what kinds of luxuries were available in your town and to your family in particular?

WA: Very little luxuries. If a family was able to get a radio or a hand-cranked music box, I think it was called a graphophone, at that time.

KT: Gramophone, hand-cranked, uh huh.

WA: Yeah, gramophone, yeah. And a few records. That was, now, that was a true luxury. We always had plenty of food. So, that could not--that was no luxury there, but there was nothing that we would hardly consider a luxury unless some new clothes or something like that, which you didn't have that, you didn't have new clothes all the time. Generally, you got new clothes at the beginning of school, and then again at Christmas, instead of getting lots of toys, you had very few toys and you got a pair of shoes, or something that was useful that you could use like that, and lots of fruit, you know. Fruits and nuts.

KT: Not nail polish and not . . .

WA: No. You see, the Baptist church, in particular, discouraged those things--lipstick and nail polish--on the basis that that would lead to sin, you know, because, I suppose, they felt that this would make the woman more susceptible to the men pursuing her. But at the same time, it lessened the desire to go places, because the church didn't look very favorably on this, you see. But, of course, that . . .

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

KT: Okay. So, let's move on up, then, to the Great Lakes. What was it like when you got there? What were your impressions?

WA: Pure awe.

(Laughter)

WA: I was awed, certainly. It was a very trying thing. But for me, it wasn't that difficult to adjust, because all my life I had been subjected to strict discipline by my father, so it wasn't so difficult for me. But the fact that they cut all of your hair off, just right off, and then put you in through all of this rigorous training . . .

KT: What year was this?

WA: This is in '43.

KT: Forty-three. Was there still segregation in the armed services or no more?

WA: Oh, yes. There was definitely very much so. And you had all-Black units going through. You had Whites were in charge at the top. And then you had Blacks, some Blacks underneath them, and so forth. But it was sixteen weeks of very vigorous training. Of course, at the end of it, I came out of it with a chance to go to a school to--you know, they had schools that they would send you to, like storekeeper's school, yeoman school, and things like that, to learn to do those jobs. But there were only a limited number of openings that were available. My typing was not good enough for me to get within the quota [that] was allowed for the storekeeper's school, which I wanted. So, I was encouraged to go to cook's and baker's school, which I really didn't want. (KT laughs.) But (chuckles) the instructor, oh, he says, the war would only last a year. You got a chance of coming out with a rate. So, you might as well go ahead and take it. It's available, go ahead. Make the best of it while you're going to be in because we'll win this war (telephone rings) and be back home in a year's time, anyway. Little did we know it was going to last much, much longer, but that's how I end up going to cook's and baker's school and ended up in the food service part of the navy.

KT: And so after you left the Great Lakes area, where did you go? Did you get a chance to experience Chicago at all?

WA: No. We only saw it as we went in there, and as we left. We didn't see much of it then. No, there was . . .

KT: So then where did you go?

WA: Then we was, myself and those of us who were going to this particular school, we went down to Corpus Christi, Texas. And that's where we went through that training. And I stayed down there for quite some time, I guess a couple years or year and a half or so. It seemed like forever, but . . .

KT: Did you like it?

WA: It was different. Yes, I suppose, I did like it, because it was different. It was the first time I'd ever been any place except the farm and, of course, I'd been to Birmingham, because my grandparents lived up there. Well, they lived in a suburb of Birmingham. But even that wasn't nice, because, in those days, Birmingham, in particular the suburbs, didn't offer you an awful lot, but Corpus Christi, in particular during this area, during the war, there were lots of people and the shipyards were growing, and there were lots of people there. So, yes, I think I did like it, yeah.

KT: And was it segregated in Texas at that period of time?

WA: It was segregated, yes, definitely. You had certain areas of town that were all Black, and this is where you went. The buses were segregated, the city buses were segregated, but the military buses weren't really segregated. They attempted to do some of it, but it wasn't really. But the movies on the base was segregated. And the barracks and so forth, Blacks slept in separate barracks from Whites. The movies, right up front were a number rows for the Blacks and all the other was for Whites. It was really terrible. So consequently, some of us didn't see too many movies because we resented having to sit right up front, and besides, it was too close. You didn't, you know, we didn't like it in the first place. But, yes, there was segregation down there.

KT: So then after Corpus Christi, where did you go?

WA: Oh, my gosh. From there, I went to California, yes.

KT: And then what did you observe there, compared to Corpus Christi . . .

WA: Well, it was getting better all the time. But there was segregation still, but there were more things to do, more areas to do it in, and the atmosphere was much better than where I had been before. So, I liked the Bay area. I was in the Bay area. And I liked it better than Corpus Christi, naturally. And it was a great improvement, you know, from where I had come from. I spent some time there.

But, prior to going there, I had spent sometime on a minesweeper down on the Gulf of Mexico. We swept for mines because the Germans were coming into the gulf and laying mines, dropping mines in there, and we would go out and sweep for mines, and when we would find them, we'd blow them up, you know, and all that. But then, I went out to California and was stationed in several places out there. And, by the time I was. . . . One ship that I was supposed to go out on, for, I can't remember, some reason, at the last moment, they changed, and I didn't have to go out. The ship went out and got blown up.

I was then transferred up to Fallon, Nevada, way up in the desert. And I stayed up there for quite a while.

KT: And was it still all-Black units that you were in, or you were, by this time, isolated?

WA: No, this is still all-Black units. You worked with Whites, but you slept, Blacks slept by themselves. And the buses, the city buses, and all were segregated.

KT: Even in Nevada?

WA: Yeah. Yeah. Even Reno was segregated. If you went into a place, just one (person), you didn't really have any problem too much. But if a half dozen Blacks went in, they didn't want you in there.

KT: One was all right.

WA: Yeah.

KT: A group was not all right.

WA: Right. And they didn't, even the hotel accommodations were not available to you. I remember meeting Hattie McDaniels in Reno.

KT: Who was that, Hattie McDaniels?

WA: Hattie McDaniels, one of the famous (Black) movie stars of her day. She was one that really helped to pave the way for Blacks. Most of her roles were played as maids and cooks, and things like that. And I remember seeing her, having to go to these, the little small Black places where she was welcomed. And she stayed in little Black hotel. And then some of us who had been talking with her found that she was not welcomed in the nicer hotels. They were there shooting a movie, during the time, and she was not welcome in the nicer hotels, you see. And that really bothered us, because here was a person that was participating in making movies, and so forth, and yet, her money was not good enough to get her into the nicer hotels where the rest of the cast was staying. But she didn't seem to let it bother her. She accepted it, and she always encouraged us to try and find some good in everything and try and rise above that.

Every day that I went in--I didn't go into town every day, but during that period that she was there, whenever I did go in, I would try and find her and just listen to her, you know. She liked to have a drink, you know, and she would sit there and have a drink and talk to us, you know. There's a very good line attributed to her. I didn't hear this myself, but they said that someone asked her why would she accept playing the role of a maid in a movie, and her answer was that, well, she had two choices. She could not be in the movies, and work as a maid, and get almost nothing for it, or she could act in the movies, act as a maid, and get paid big money for it. So says, "What would you choose?" (Chuckles) Which I thought was quite good.

KT: Horse sense.

WA: Right, right.

KT: So, after you left Nevada, did you get on the ship to the Pacific, or not yet?

WA: Yes. I was sent out on a ship, on a seaplane tender, and spent some time out on that in the--we would go out on patrols out in the area. By this time, the war had finished. And so I rotated between ships and land bases like Treasure Island and Alameda Naval Air Station. And, and of course, down to San Diego, at North Island, and then on ships and back and forth. And some of these ships, I would go to the Far East out to Japan. Spend . . .

KT: With other Black soldiers or you being by yourself?

WA: There were always, almost always, there were some Blacks on the ship, but not always within the department that I was. Mostly, I found myself the only Black person in the commissary department, which, our job was to prepare food for the enlisted people. But we had stewards, the stewards were generally Blacks or Filipinos or Chinese. And generally, you would have a mixture of these. I was on one ship that, when I was down in the Caribbeans a few years later than this period, where I was the only Black on the whole ship out of two hundred . . .

KT: What year was that?

WA: Oh, gosh, I can't remember the year . . .

KT: That's okay.

WA: Yeah. I was the only Black on the entire ship. I guess it must have been around, come to think of it, it must have been about '46 or '47. . . . I guess, yeah, I guess around '46, or so.

KT: Right after the war?

WA: Yeah. And I was the only Black out of 250 or so men. I was the only Black on there. But there were many, many instances throughout my entire twenty-four-year career where I would be the only Black in my department. But, over the years, I learned to just ignore that, and it never bothered me, because I had learned to look at people as individuals, and not by their color, you see. So, that is something that evolved throughout my years of being, I suppose, being cast in that position of being an only one of a very few.

KT: Were you aware of the sufferings that the Japanese people [in the U.S.] were going through about the time of the war, in terms of losing their lands and having to be relegated to these [internment] camps and all that. Were you aware of that, or . . .

WA: No. During that time, I was not aware of it. The propaganda and the mode of things in those days were so vigorously directed against

the Japanese, the atrocities that were being visited upon the Japanese-Americans, I don't recall ever hearing of it. I don't even recall hearing of it until well after the war.

KT: And when you were in San Francisco, you did not notice all the vacant stores . . .

WA: I was not involved that much in the outside community. I was still a little Alabama boy that was trying to learn his way around, you know, and I didn't get that much exposure in what was going around out in the cities. I spent most of my time working or for recreation, I would visit the clubs on the base or, in the evenings, go into town with some of the guys, and I only went where they took me, because I didn't know anything about where I was going. And I had what I thought was a good time and all that, but I did not know much about what was going on. All of this came later.

KT: And then, how did you get to Hawai'i?

WA: I came to Hawai'i in 1965. I was sent here to manage the navy commissary store, meat department, for the navy commissary stores.

KT: So, you had been promoted and promoted along the way.

WA: Right. I was then near the top of the enlisted rank, which was E-8. And I was a chief, what we call a senior chief. And I was sent here to manage the navy meat department for the navy commissary stores, and responsible for the logistics for all of the meat products for all of the navy commissary stores here in Hawai'i, which the headquarters being Pearl Harbor. And, we have one out at Lualualei, we had Barber's Point, and we had the one over at North Island. No, is it North Island? The island right over by the . . .

KT: By Ala Moana?

WA: No, no. Where the, where the . . .

KT: Magic Island?

WA: Monument for the ship that [i.e., the Arizona Memorial] . . .

KT: Oh, Pearl Harbor? Off it?

WA: Yeah.

KT: Ah, Ellis, no. Anyway.

WA: Yeah.

KT: Okay. (Chuckles)

WA: There's a little island [Ford Island] out there. We had one out there. Then I, also, at that time, was responsible for bringing in

most of the meat products for the marines. And I also, for a while, brought in the beef, lamb and veal products for the air force commissary store.

It was an enormous undertaking, in that we had to anticipate a ninety-day lead time, in order to always have products for the people. And so, we had to order three months ahead, had to anticipate what we would need three months down the road, and get it in the pipeline so that it was always here. We didn't always hit it just right. Sometimes, we'd run out for a few days because something would delay the ship, and the ship didn't get here for maybe a week or two behind schedule, or something, and then we'd have to go to the outside and get a little meat from out there, but it was very interesting and very rewarding.

I instituted some meat-cutting procedures that are still in use out there. And some procedures for ordering meats that are still being used. And so, it was a success, I think.

KT: So, when did you start to notice that the desegregation in the armed services began to occur? How did that happen, and how did it affect you?

WA: That happened, that began to happen way back [in 1948] when [President Harry S] Truman signed the bill [Executive Order 9981] to start doing away with that [e.g., segregation]. It didn't . . .

KT: That's an executive order, was it not?

WA: Right, right.

KT: Yes. Okay.

WA: It didn't come, it didn't completely wipe itself out overnight, but, you see, you must remember that in the navy, segregation was not as overt as it was in the other services.

KT: I didn't know that.

WA: The reason being, the close proximity you have to work and live on ships precluded a lot of the real overt stuff, you see. You're living in the hold of a ship, where you've got 3[00], 4[00], 500 men, confined in a ship. It takes away the ability to really do that to such a great extent. So, it wasn't near as bad, and so the integration in the navy seemed to have been easier. But a lot of it lingered on for quite a few years, particular on the shore stations, this is when it really popped up.

KT: The what?

WA: On the shore stations, this meaning on land.

KT: I see.

WA: You see.

KT: Shore stations.

WA: Yeah. This is where it really came up because, now, you weren't living all close together. Some people may be living outside of the base, if they had their families there. And sometimes, they'd put you in the same barracks, but they'd have Whites down there and the Blacks up here. And then, that, they had to do away with that. But then, when you go into the clubs, they were supposed to be desegregated, but then there would be this little frictions coming here. And people would have a tendency to segregate themselves. I don't know if it was conscious, or unconscious, but you walk in there, and you see Blacks as they come in, they'd get over wherever there was a Black at, you know. And Whites would do the same thing.

KT: Were there other ethnic groups in the navy at that time? Were there Hispanics, for example, or Japanese?

WA: Yeah, yeah. There were Hispanics, not an awful lot of them, and there were a few Chinese, and there were a few Puerto Ricans that you'd find here and there. Yes, you had some of those.

KT: And would they form their own separate groups, too, or then . . .

WA: They, particular the Filipinos, would do that. The Filipinos would do that quite a bit. They were very clannish, you know. And for good reason, I suppose, because they were looked down upon by the Whites and they were really segregated against by the Whites, just as much or maybe even more than against the Blacks. So, you had a lot of that, but eventually, it worked itself out, but yes, it was there.

KT: Would there be a natural affinity with Blacks and Filipinos, or Blacks and Chinese, or Blacks and Puerto Ricans, or Hispanics, or not necessarily?

WA: There's always has been that closeness between non-Caucasian people. Anywhere you go, anywhere I have been dropped, my travels to foreign countries, to the Philippines, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, every place I have been, there seemed to be that natural gravity toward each other. In these foreign countries, I found myself being treated different from the Whites. They would tend to treat me better than the Whites. And I think it had something to do with the attitude of the Whites. The Whites tended to have that arrogance, for the most part--not all of them, but for the most part--that arrogance, "I'm better than you" attitude, and the remarks, calling people things like gooks, and things like that, insulting to them. So, they naturally, there was that gravitation toward the darker races, it just seemed to be there.

KT: Did you ever notice the Black newspapers, either from your time in Alabama all the way up through your travels? Were you ever aware of

them?

WA: There's a, let's see, what was it? The Chicago Defender, was it?

KT: Uh huh.

WA: Yeah. Oh, yes. That was the gospel (chuckles), that was the gospel word. Oh, yes. Whenever we could get that, we cherished that, and we read every bit of it.

KT: How would you get it? How did you first become aware of it? Do you remember?

WA: My mother used to get that paper. She subscribed to it years ago. It would always be a week old when she got it, but I think, it came out once a week, I believe.

KT: And what was your reaction to that, from the first time you saw it through the years? Did you . . .

WA: Oh, I had a feeling of pride that we had a paper, that was produced by a Black. And this is where we felt we got the real truth, as close as we were going to get to the truth of a bit of news reporting. We felt that we were getting it from there. And we got, we read of news that would never be shown in the White papers. And this was of great interest to us. We were able to find out a little bit of what was going on in the Black community.

KT: At a national level.

WA: Right, mm hmm. Yeah.

KT: And could get some positive feedback compared to the negative that would be . . .

WA: Absolutely.

KT: . . . in the regular papers. Now, would you have a chance to have anything like that while you were in the military service, or you would have to go to a certain base, and . . .

WA: Well, there were--you could--there were places in town you could buy that paper because, there were certain Black establishments where they would get in the Black paper. The same as it was when Ebony came out. You could find it only in the Black establishments mostly, record stores and barbershops, and things like that. They would have it there. Even back in the days when the only thing we had was the Defender, you may find it in a barbershop, they'd have a rack full of them there, because they would bring them in and keep them for sale there, or a record store. And they may be a couple weeks old, some of them, you'd still get it, because you wanted to read this.

KT: So, you were mainly aware of the Chicago Defender, not the New York Amsterdam News, or the Pittsburgh Courier, or the . . .

WA: The Courier, we got involved in that, but the Defender was the most popular paper that we read.

KT: Well, I think, we can call it a day for today, and then we can continue one more time and you can tell me about your experiences here in Hawai'i, and your marriage, and your work, and the people of the Islands, and all that.

WA: Well, okay, we'll go into some of that.

KT: Next time.

WA: Next time. And touch on some of that.

KT: Okay. Thank you for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW

Tape No. 18-27-2-88

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Walter Alexander (WA)

July 26, 1988

Honolulu, O'ahu

BY: Kathryn Takara (KT)

KT: Okay. We are here today on July 26, 1988, at the home of Walter and Lorraine Alexander. And Kathryn Takara is interviewing him on Punahou Street in Honolulu, Hawai'i.

Mr. Alexander, can you tell me a little bit about the name of the town that you were born in, before we jump over to the topic of Blacks in Hawai'i?

(WA adjusts microphone.)

WA: Your question about where I was born, down in Alabama. As I think I mentioned before, I was born in the county of Green County, but the little town near which I was born was a very small town, but the name was Boligee. And that's spelled B-O-L-I-G-E-E. It's an Indian name, I believe Choctaw Indian name. We subsequently moved. When I was rather small, we moved to--within the same county--to another place where my father bought a farm. The little place there is Clinton. C-L-I-N-T-O-N. But it is just a little place where you get one or two little stores and a crossroad, and it takes three people to see it, you know.

(Laughter)

WA: There it was. And, of course, the county seat is about eight miles from where the farm is. And that is Eutaw, Alabama, and that spells E-U-T-A-W, which is far different from the state of Utah. Pronounces the same, but it spells E-U-T-A-W, and there again, we have another Indian word.

KT: Did you ever know anything about the Indians that lived in that area of Alabama? Did you hear anything when you were a kid?

WA: Very, very little, because the Indians were all gone from that area. There were, of course, even now, there are people in the area who still are part-Indian. They have a considerable amount of Indian blood in them. My family had some on my father's side, had some Indian blood. And even today, you will see descendants of some of

the people who were born from Black and Indian parents, mixed, are still in that area.

KT: Were there any cultural carryovers from the Indian line there? Any words that you can remember or any practices?

WA: I don't think so. I can't recall anything culturally that was carried over from that. I suppose the African culture was so strong, as you already know. It's so strong, I suppose it just dominated everything else, practically. Because I don't recall anything at all along those lines.

KT: Well, let's take a jump to your years here in Hawai'i starting in--what year was that? Nineteen . . .

WA: Nineteen sixty-five, I came here.

KT: Okay. When you arrived in the Islands, in terms of ethnic groups, what did you observe and how did you, as a Black-American or Afro-American, feel amidst all of those ethnic groups?

WA: When I arrived here, there was still a good deal of segregation practiced here. I spent most of my non-working time with other military people. I did come into town, but I found that coming into town, if I went to Waikīkī and to some of the better hotels--there's only two, three hotels at that time, prominent hotels. There was the Royal Hawaiian, the Moana and, well, the Alexander Hotel was Downtown, but I didn't go in there very much because, I went in there a couple of times, and I found I was not treated quite the way I should be, so I went to the Ala Moana, I mean to the Moana or the Royal Hawaiian. And I would spend my liberties in or around those places most of the time, during those early days. The Hilton [Hawaiian] Village was in the process of developing at that time. And as it developed, there was another place that I went. And I found that you didn't encounter as much resentment or snide remarks, and things of that nature, as you did if you went downtown Honolulu, like Bishop Street and around there. And I never did frequent Hotel and Smith Street, those areas in there. I never did frequent those.

KT: When you say snide remarks, what do you mean? Like what? Can you give me some examples?

WA: They would refer to us sometimes as darkies or there's another word, pōpolo, is it, I think?

KT: Pōpolo.

WA: Pōpolo. And these would be Haoles doing that and local people of Hawaiian descent, mostly. Would be referring to us, that popolo. We didn't know too much about that word, what it meant and so forth, but we did know that even just the tone of the way they used it, it was used in an offensive way. The women who frequent those places, would frequently not sit and talk with the Blacks. They preferred

to be with the Whites. And it was just a feeling that if you went in there, you couldn't associate freely and be accepted freely. You'd go in, you'd spend your money having drinks, and then you'd get up and leave. So I didn't go into those places. I went into the Alexander Hotel a couple times, I suppose. Other than that, I just--I didn't bother. But, in the Waikiki area, in particular in the Royal Hawaiian and the Moana, we were accepted there without any consequence, whatsoever. As a matter of fact, some of the wealthier people from the Mainland, I assume, they felt free to do these things because this was then considered overseas, (chuckles) and, of course, being overseas, as they would term it, they would mix freely with us and they would--we didn't have very much money, and they spent money on our drinks and food, and so forth, and gave us a real lovely time. We enjoyed it. Had a lot of fun with them.

KT: Did you ever hear that pōpolo was actually a berry, a dark berry used for healing?

WA: No. I never did. No, I never did.

KT: Mm hmm. That is the original meaning of the word pōpolo. It's a healing berry. It's a very dark berry.

WA: Uh huh, uh huh.

KT: And initially, when I heard the term, I considered it also as probably derogatory, and one of my dear Hawaiian friends said that for people that used it with a certain tone, perhaps it was, but really, it was a very healing berry, and it was cherished in the old Hawaiian way. So, I found that interesting just to know that that was the function of that, a medicinal plant.

WA: Yeah, right.

KT: But, anyway, okay.

WA: Well, I'll be darned.

KT: What were you doing once you retired from the military? How did your job situation go, and how did you interact with the various ethnic groups, besides the Haoles that you found here? What was the initial [contact] and then how did it develop?

WA: When I retired from the service, I had no intention of remaining here. My intention was to go to the Mainland, and I had pretty much secured a job back in California. But just prior to my retirement . . .

KT: In what year?

WA: That was in 1967.

KT: Okay.

WA: I was involved in an accident where a fellow ran into the back of my car and just totaled my car out. And while that was being taken care of through the courts, I was discharged, and I had to wait until this thing went through. So, I decided I would, you know, I couldn't sit around, so I took the H&R Block income tax course and started working for them. I had done this, I guess, back in November or December or something like that. And then January, I was discharged in January and started right working for them. I worked for them in their Kailua office. They elevated me during that period, the first year, to manager of that office. And for the next two or three years, during tax season I would work for them and manage that office.

After the first season working for them in '67, I was approached by a fellow that had been into my office, and I had done his taxes. He approached me about working for him. He was selling mutual funds. He was manager of an office located over here in the Ala Moana building. There was a brand-new building they had just built. So, of course, I didn't know anything about mutual funds, and he assured me that I could do it. So, I took him up on it, and sure enough, I got started and I sold mutual funds.

I was very apprehensive in approaching people who were of other ethnic groups because I had no idea how they would accept buying from me, you know. Whereas the military--I felt very comfortable with people in the military, Black, White, whatever, but outside of that, I felt very, very uncomfortable. I overcame that, and I found that people were interested not in my color, interested in what the product was, what would it do for them, and how much did it cost. (KT laughs.) Those were the three things that interest them, and that has stuck with me ever since. Let me just. . . .

KT: We'll take a little break here.

WA: Yeah, take a little break.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

KT: We'll continue now.

WA: I've not found, in all these years in working in the sales of insurance and mutual funds, which I still sell, I haven't found any problem in doing business with the local people or people of other races because here again, as I say, they're not interested in color, they're interested in the product, and how much it cost them, and what it will do for them. It really surprised me, though, that people would often tell me that, particularly when I branched into the insurance business, that they had relatives who were in the business, who had already sold them a life policy or whatever. And because this person has not given them service, they were ready to go with me. So, I discovered that service was the important item. And so, I concentrated and have concentrated on service ever since. Because there are many other agents who can sell the same product,

but I figured that I can do better in the service area and, therefore, I pursued that, and it has been very successful for me.

KT: So then, when you met your wife, she's not a Black woman, tell me about how that went, in terms of acceptance within the community, within the family, and all of that.

WA: Lorraine had her own business in the same office building that I'm in. She was selling office filing systems. And we would see each other in the parking lot or in the elevator. And one day, I asked her what her name was, and she said Lorraine. So I, "Oh, 'Sweet Lorraine,'" you know the song, (KT chuckles) and we would speak and smile and go on. Finally one day, I saw her at a--the building management had a little party. And so we spent a little time talking. I asked her to go to lunch the following day, I guess it was. Took her to lunch and we hit it off very well, and from that, it just on and on until we started seeing a lot of each other.

KT: Is she Japanese?

WA: No, she's Chinese.

KT: Chinese, excuse me.

WA: Yeah. Lorraine was born in China.

KT: Oh.

WA: Her mother's from here, her father's from China. He married her mother, took her to China. Lorraine was born in China, and, of course, came back here and got her citizenship here. But she was a Chinese citizen to begin with, in mainland China. Her father was in the diplomatic corps of the, then, I guess the. . . . I don't know who was--I don't know if the Chiang Kai-Shek people were in power then. I presume they must have been because they were in for so long.

Anyway, she and I dated each other for a long time. And people didn't--we never noticed any . . .

KT: Hostility.

WA: . . . hostility or anything. Maybe a little envy. (Chuckles) But . . .

KT: (Chuckles) I love it.

WA: But, other than that, nothing. Because by this time, I was living in Hawai'i Kai, and she was living in Nu'uanu. We went places, did things together, and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. I've never been one to just isolate myself with Black people, period. I have always had a mixture of friends and associates. And so this fit in very well.

And, of course, when we decided to get married, she had two daughters, she has two daughters by a previous marriage. So that worked out very well. You know, of course, the kids would have a little resentment to begin with, but that has worked out quite well. And it never got to a point we had any real problem.

So far as her mother, and her brothers are concerned, just total open arms. Her mother and I met when her eldest daughter--this is before Lorraine and I got married--her eldest daughter got married, and I met her mother then. Her mother came here from San Diego. She lives with my wife's younger brother. He's a dentist over there. So she came, as a matter of fact, they're not really in the San Diego proper, it's in La Mesa. So their mother came over and I met her mother. And when I met this lady, she's very small, you can't believe. Her head doesn't come--I can hold my arm out like this and she can walk right under it and . . .

(Laughter)

WA: . . . never touch. She's very, very tiny. But she's such a beautiful person, you know, and she and I hit it off just like that. [WA snaps his fingers.] I got her address while she was here, and when she went back, I sent her little notes and things like that, because she reminded me so much of my own mother, in that her--not physically, because my mother was a much taller and larger woman--but in her manner of doing things, and the things she says, and her concerns and so forth. So, I began to think of her more like a mother, and I've always, for years, I've always sent my mother, as long as she was living, I sent her little things--just something to say, hey, I'm thinking about you, I love you, you know. I order, a lot of times, I'll order bacon or ham or something from back East or from different places on the Mainland that is better than you can buy in the store. And I would send them this and I, many years ago, I started buying the fruitcake from Corsicana, Texas. It's a beautiful, beautiful thing and the most delicious fruitcake that I've ever tasted. And I always send that as a Christmas gift to my mother. And so I started doing this for Lorraine's mother, and the first time I did it, I forgot to mention to Lorraine, and her mother mentioned, she, "Oh, you sent my mother this?"

I said, "Yeah."

"You didn't say anything about it."

Of course, I'd never even thought about it because she's such a wonderful person. But we have had so much fun together, and whenever she comes over, she stays here with us, and we just enjoy her so much. She's a fantastic lady, and her brothers, they--the whole family, they just with open arms, you know, just. . . . Because we would go over, before we got married, we'd go over, and I would take her up, leave her up there, then I would go down and stay with my friend. And then we would go out for dinner, and this and

that, and visit with them so, I guess, they figured at some point we'd probably get married, and we did. And there was no problem, no nothing. It was just--and her mother thinks of me as her own son. She's up in her eighties now, but she's just fantastic. She has a hip problem, and sometimes that bothers her, but she has more energy, and she just goes right on. Just a fantastic person.

KT: Do you think that their wonderful attitude, that of the whole family, is a result of not growing up, at least the parents, in the United States where there's that kind of a stigma or history connected with the negative with Blacks? Do you think it's because the mother didn't have that, that she could just meet you as a human, rather than . . .

WA: Well, I can't very well say that, because her mother--well, maybe so, in a sense. See, (her) mother was born and raised here.

KT: Oh.

WA: She's born on the Big Island and was raised here.

KT: Okay.

WA: And, of course, they didn't have that much exposure to Blacks in those days. But I think the mere fact that they're Oriental, their acceptance of other people of different ethnic background and races is different from the Caucasian. The European has that stigma more than any other area of the world that I know of. And I suppose it's because they've been exposed more to more slavery and more human abuse than just about anyone else. Not to say that the Orient is free from human abuse, certainly not, but not on a specific racial basis. And therefore, I think, their way of thinking, accepting is so much different. I found this to be true, not only with my in-laws, but with other people here locally, and people in the Far East. I have found that the acceptance of others, people of other races, are different, seem to be easier for them to accept than Caucasians. I have found that in just about every place that I have been--I've been to quite a number of places in the South Pacific and in the Far East--non-Whites have been accepted among the natives of these various places more freely than Caucasians. And I think that has to do a lot with the arrogance, the perceived arrogance. And then, sometimes, it's not just perceived, it's for real, that is displayed by the Caucasian.

KT: So then, you got into your own business--no, initially, you went to work for someone, selling mutual funds, and then you . . .

WA: Yeah.

KT: . . . branched into insurance, is that how it . . .

WA: Yeah. From that, it lead into my selling insurance, and I got involved with a large company, the Travelers Insurance Company. I

placed my license with them. You see, in the insurance business, most all agents are independent. You're an independent contractor in business for yourself. You're contracted with the insurance company. There are a few exceptions, but for the most part, they're independent. I got involved with them, worked with them, and eventually, began to do more insurance than mutual funds. First was life insurance, then got into the accident, the health, and then into the casualty property, and bonding, and everything. So, now, I am licensed to do the whole thing.

But, this--the feeling of working for yourself caught on and I liked working for myself. I find that you tend to put more hours in. But I've always worked long hours, because, in my opinion, as I can see it, any person that only works eight hours a day, will never get ahead. Eight hours of work a day, is just not enough for a person who really wants to get ahead. You just can't do it in eight hours a day.

KT: I like your philosophy.

WA: It requires much more than that.

KT: I like your philosophy. So then, as you've been here through the years, from '65 or so, what changes again, have you observed vis-à-vis the Black community? For example, perhaps in the '60s, there were more military or whatever. What kinds of observations have you observed that have led you to move, perhaps say, from a focus on the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] to the new Afro-American Association or whatever? What kinds of changes have you seen take place?

WA: Well, I've seen a number of changes in the community. First of all, I think one of the things that stands out most in my memory is the fact that, during those early years, most Blacks did not frequent the better places down in Waikīkī. If you saw them down there, they were not at the better places. All of that is in the past now. You see a great influx of Blacks in any place, all of the nice places, the better places throughout the city, restaurants, lounges, hotels or whatever.

Also, the number of Black tourists coming to the Islands were very, very small during those years. And when they did come here, some of them spent almost all of their vacation in the hotel, either in their room or within the confines of the hotel, and the hotel grounds. They didn't venture out much because they didn't see many Blacks. You see Blacks having come here and become so well assimilated into the community. It was a totally new thing for them. They were looking for a Black area of town, like we have in so many cities . . .

KT: Cluster.

WA: . . . on the Mainland. Right. And I've had them ask me (telephone

rings) . . .

KT: Take a break.

(Taping stops, then resumes.)

WA: . . . the great influx now of the Black tourist.

KT: Compared to the, say, the lower economic bracket that was often here or had been absorbed, and many people have been absorbed into the community.

WA: Right. And you see the tourist who came here were very few that ventured to the beautiful Hawai'i. But they got here, and they didn't see a lot of Blacks, and they didn't know what to do, and how to take this. They didn't know if they would be accepted in the various nightclubs, and so forth. They have--all of this has changed. Now, you see them coming here by the planeloads, and they're all over the place. They're enjoying themselves, having a wonderful time. They're not spending all their time in Waikīkī. They are also going to the outer islands. And they are taking tours throughout the place so they can see what it's all about. Whenever they get an opportunity to make friends with someone locally, they do, and they've found that they can make friends with non-Blacks just as easy as they can with Blacks, and they thoroughly enjoy themselves.

KT: I'm waiting for a Black tourist agency. In fact, I've even thought of having bed and breakfast at my house. I'm waiting for . . .

WA: We do . . .

KT: . . . those kinds of receptions.

WA: We do have a Black tour agency here. Ron Williams has one.

KT: I didn't know that.

WA: Yeah. Ron Williams owns a travel agency.

KT: Hmm. Thank you for telling me that. Okay well, as a Black businessman, as time progressed, although I can also say that you were just a businessman, and you saw different Blacks coming to live here, what kinds of observations did you observe with that, how it affected the larger community?

WA: There's been, I think, very little local resentment to the influx of Blacks into the community. I've observed more apparent concern from the influx of non-Blacks, of Haoles and, of course, most recently the influx of Japanese, particularly the rich buying up property. But that is not due to an ethnic thing, so far as the resentment to the Japanese. It's due to an economic thing. But the influx of more Blacks moving here has--I haven't seen that much resentment

towards that.

But there is, I discovered that there is this problem that we have insofar as the rather clannish attitude in the workplace. Particularly in the federal and federal, city, and state civil services. If you have a relative working in a department, then you're pretty well assured of a job, whether or not you have the qualifications or not. If there's several of you applying for this job, and you're the least qualified, but you have a relative there, chances are you will get that job above the more qualified. There's a lot of nepotism going on throughout all of the civil service jobs here, including the federal. That is breaking down, little by little, but it's still prevalent to some great extent.

These things are changing, though. The state government and the city government are changing, and this is due to the influx of non-Asians into the state, and the added participation of these people in the political arena. This is bringing about change. See, this being the youngest state in the union, we're still going through birth pains. It will take us another fifty years to really come around full cycle because we move very slow in this state. We make changes very slow. But because of the influx of new blood, so to speak, into the political arena, we are seeing these changes. The old guard is dying out or retiring, and new blood is coming in. Even the new Asians that are going into politics look at things differently because they are more progressive in their thinking. A lot of them were educated on the Mainland, their college education was on the Mainland, and they have had some exposure. You see, many years ago, very few people traveled outside of these islands. Now, the world has become so small, transportation and communication has condensed the size of the world where people are much more knowledgeable of what's going on in other areas, and these changes are coming about. These changes are coming about very fast now.

KT: So, what about the Hawaiians, the people who were native or indigenous to the land and who, perhaps, are developing a new kind of consciousness, new kinds of demands, in terms of their own land, in terms of the other people that live here? How have you found your contact with the local Hawaiian people to be?

WA: My experience with the local Hawaiians has been very good, in that they tend to identify with Blacks to some fairly great extent. But I look at them as being the ethnic group that somewhat got left out. Part---to a great extent, this is not their fault, but then to an extent, it is their fault. They fail to grasp the changes, grasp onto the changes and change with the society, and at the same time, hold on to their culture. You see, the Chinese and the Japanese did that. They made those changes, and they held on to their culture. The Hawaiian was, somehow, was unable to do that.

KT: Do you think that was because they were too gentle and too docile?

WA: But that's their nature. They are probably the most giving people

in the state. They give their shirt right off their back. That's just their nature. They are not a hostile people. They don't think in terms of me, me, me. The extended family is extremely important to them. And it doesn't take as much to make them happy, materially, as it does most other ethnic groups. They haven't, even till this day, they haven't, for the most part, haven't learned that, and maybe that's good. They have not adapted that feeling of materialistic wealth is greater than everything else. And as a result, they got left out of a lot of the things. But they are making changes. We do have the young people who are coming around that are making changes. But they suffer from a similar problem that the Black community suffers from, and that is the inability to join forces as a single cohesive group and bring pressure in areas that will bring about change or resolve the problems that they have.

Now, I have found that in all the years that I've been here, the Black community has been so splintered. We have the NAACP, which is our primary and most active organization throughout the country. We have the people like the LINKS and we have the various sororities and other social groups, clubs, that are doing their thing. Everybody is doing their own thing, and no one was doing anything together. When we conceived the idea of the Afro-American Association, which Mr. Franklin, Harold Franklin, started this, the idea was to bring together the Black community, particular, his initial idea was to bring together the professional and business people in the community in order to establish some kind of economic base and at the same time, to become visible. Because as an ethnic group, we were so well assimilated in the community until we were totally invisible as a Black community.

KT: Is that why the, (sings) "[Don't want to be] no sideshow, no longer invisible."

WA: Right. So, we decided that we wanted to become visible, and the only way to do that was to bring about a cohesive, a complete cohesive effort on the part of all of these splinter organizations. And we have been very successful, to a degree, in doing this. In the past year and a half, I see the Black community gaining more in a political sense then ever before in all of the years that I've been here. And it's simply because we have come together. We in the Afro-American Association were able to convince these other people that we were not a threat to them, that we would not try to take over their territory, we were just simply trying to support them.

KT: Can we take a break?

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

KT: Okay, we'll pick it up now.

WA: Let's see, where was I at?

KT: Um, Afro-American Association, and the fact that we were not a threat . . .

WA: Right, uh huh.

KT: . . . to other people, but rather that we were just creating our own energy sources.

WA: As a result of our convincing them that we needed to come together, we were able to get that off the ground. During the time when Coretta King was here last year, that was the first time we were able to really get them to work together. Since then, we've had good success and our paper, our newspaper, we started a monthly newspaper in the beginning of June 1987. And that has done more to bring the Black community together and to bring it out in the eyes of the public than anything else. This paper's gone to the Mainland and even into some foreign countries it is being sent. We've got a lot of feedback from people throughout the country. The governor receives his paper. The mayor receives his paper every time it comes out. And they read it, and they have commented to us on how impressed it is to them and that they welcome the input that they get from reading this paper. So, it has been the one instrument that has done the most to bring the Black community together and to bring forth talents that we never knew existed--some of us never knew existed. We have many, many talented people in this community that have been here for years, and we never knew each other because, generally, our friends and associates are those people whom we work with, we do business with.

KT: Or that we live next to.

WA: That we--right. And even then, sometimes, if we live next door, we merely speak, "Hi," and that but we don't become really involved. But this has brought about a lot of changes in that area. We have talents coming out from places we never dreamed of. We find that we have many lawyers, doctors, teachers, educators, both at the University [of Hawai'i] and in the public school system. It's just a wonderful experience to see this happen. And we're committed and I am in particular committed to further this as much as we can to bring about this cohesiveness so that our young people will be able to see these various role models and learn something about their heritage, which will give them pride in what they are doing and what they want to do.

KT: And who they are.

WA: And who they are.

KT: Well, I think that's a good place for us to call it a close, unless

you have any other particular comments that you'd like to make at this moment.

WA: Mm, no, I don't think so. I will go through some of my papers back there, and see what I might come up with and get that out so that we can possibly add this in at a later time.

KT: Thank you.

WA: Mm hmm.

KT: Thank you for your time and your sharing.

END OF INTERVIEW

Oral Histories of African Americans

Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

December 1990